State, Class Struggle and Capital in the Exposition of the Marxian Critique of Political Economy

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1. Introduction

The question of the nature and specific social role of the capitalist state and of the class struggle has been one of the most debated questions within Marxist-oriented sociological and political theory (Callinicos, 2012). It so happens that, in addition to being a crucial question for any political action that claims to act with knowledge of the facts, above all, there is no systematic development of these determinations in Marx's legacy. In this brief work I present a critical reading of Chapter VIII of Marx's Capital with the aim of restoring in the Marxist discussion the general explanation of social classes, class struggle and the State that I consider to arise from Marx's deployment of the critique of political economy.[2] This reading is inspired by the original contributions of the so-called German debate on the "derivation of the state" (cf. Müller & Neusüss, 2017; Altvater, 2017; Blanke, Jürgens, & Kastendiek, 2017, in particular) and especially in the most recent reading by Iñigo Carrera (2012, 2013). In essence, it can be said that this interpretation of Marx's work stands out for being opposed both to those that see in this chapter essentially a "historical illustration" of the determinations of capital already discovered in the exposition that precedes it (Arthur, 2002, p. 75, for example), and to those that consider that Marx's critique of political economy does not lead to an explanation of social classes, the class struggle and the State (Heinrich, 2008, p. 195 and 203, for example).

2. The determination of the extension of the working day by the class struggle

As is characteristic of Marx's exposition, the chapter in question begins with an analysis that does not seem to have an immediate connection with the previous exposition (see on this point, Iñigo Carrera, 1992, pp. 46-48, 2013, p. 313 et seq.). In this case, it is the limits of the working day. There we find that the working day is presented as a variable magnitude, "in itself and for itself indeterminate", whose limits are given at its minimum extreme by the need to produce surplus value and at its maximum by the "physical" and "moral" barriers of labor power. The immediate question that this formal analysis opens is obvious: how is the duration of the working day established? The

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[2] An extended version of this work can be seen in Starosta & Caligaris (2017, chapter 5).

subsequent analysis, focused directly on answering this question, shows what the real object of investigation of the chapter is and, consequently, the connection with the previous chapters. Essentially, what Marx finds is that in determining the length of the working day, what is at stake is the buying and selling of labor power. Here Marx presents these two subjects, confronted in the market, clamoring for the fulfillment of the "law of commodity exchange." The capitalist asks that all the use-value he has purchased be delivered; the worker, on the other hand, demands to be paid the full value of his commodity: "The capitalist, when he tries to prolong the working day as long as possible [...] reaffirms his right as a buyer. […] and the worker reaffirms his right as a salesman when he tries to reduce the working day" (Marx, 1999, pp. 281-282).

What we find in analyzing the determination of the length of the working day is, therefore, that the exchange of commodities which constitutes the purchase and sale of labor power has not yet been resolved. And it is not solved because, as was discovered at the very beginning of the investigation into the production of surplus-value, the worker does not give up the use-value of his labour-power except through the exercise of labour itself. Thus, the commodity exchange that constitutes the purchase and sale of labor power is not resolved until the moment when the amount of work that the worker is going to perform is determined, that is, when the working day is set (Iñigo Carrera, 2013, p. 94). Hence, once the form in which surplus-value is produced has been discovered, it is necessary to return to the exchange relation between the worker and the capitalist.

The first thing Marx points out in his analysis of this market exchange is that the antagonistic relationship between capitalist and worker as buyer and seller of labor power takes on a particular form: the class struggle. “Here,” says Marx, “there takes place an antinomy: right against right, both uniformly marked by the law of commodity exchange,” and “[a]mong equal rights, force decides,” so that “the regulation of the working day,” in which the buying and selling of labor power is expressed, “appears as a struggle between the collective capitalist, that is, the capitalist class, and the collective worker, that is, the working class” (Marx, 1999, p. 282).

However, the antagonism characterizing the relationship between capitalist and worker is not a feature unique to that relationship; every market relationship is, by definition, an antagonistic one. Nor is the equality of rights with which capitalist and worker confront each other peculiar to this relationship; every market relationship entails equal rights for each party. Finally, the decisive role of force in resolving the exchange is not exclusive to the exchange relationship between capitalist and worker; whenever equal rights exist within an antagonistic relationship, force is the deciding factor. Therefore, from these characteristics of the relationship between the capitalist and the worker, it does not follow that the determination of the length of the working day, whose resolution involves the buying and selling of labor power, is presented as the class struggle surrounding it. The question to be answered, then, is: why must this

relationship between the buyer and seller of labor power unfold as an antagonistic relationship between social classes? In other words, what is specific about this exchange that causes its resolution to take place through the formation of social classes and the struggle between them?

3. The historical analysis of the determination of the length of the working day

Instead of presenting a synthetic explanation of why commodity exchange between worker and capitalist is resolved through the class struggle, Marx presents a historical analysis of the fixing of the length of the working day and of the class struggle around it (cf. Müller & Neusüss, 2017, p. 194 et seq. for a rich discussion on this point). The answer we seek must arise, therefore, from the results that this historical analysis is yielding. In this sense, if the following exposition were simply a "historical illustration" of already conflicting determinations, we would ultimately be left without answering the basic question of why the exchange between the worker and the capitalist is resolved through the class struggle.

The first thing we find in this historical analysis, under section 2 of the chapter, is a historical comparison between different economic formations of society with respect to the setting of the working day. There we see that the current economic formation is distinguished because in it "an unlimited need for surplus labour arises from the very character of production" (Marx, 1999, p. 282). From this it is concluded that, if in pre-capitalist economic formations the laws related to the limit of the working day are "a positive expression of the famine of surplus labor, legalized by each of its articles," the modern factory laws "are negative expressions of that same famine." But in addition, it is found that these laws are of a "State dominated by the capitalist and the landowner" and that "the limitation of the working day was dictated by the same necessity that forces guano to be thrown in the English fields" (Marx, 1999, p. 287).

This historical analysis shows one more determination that the simple analysis of the buying and selling of labor power had not shown: the fixing of the length of the working day does not arise simply from the class struggle but is imposed as state law. On the other hand, we find that the limit to the length of the working day arises here, not simply from the strength of the working class, but from a social necessity which transcends the political action of this same class, that necessity which is the same as that which "compels the throwing of guano in the English fields." that is, the need to have a labor force that maintains its specific quality: to produce value and, specifically, surplus value. Thus, the State, insofar as it is the one that legally sanctions the limit on the working day, appears to be fulfilling this general social need and not the particular needs of the capitalist class or the working class. The State appears, therefore, above the class struggle. At the same time, however, we find that this state is dominated by the capitalist and the landlord. This presentation leaves us, therefore, with more questions

than answers. Why is the class struggle around the limit of the working day resolved through the fixing of this limit by the State? How can the state represent a social interest that is above the particular interests of social classes and at the same time be "dominated by the capitalist"? Moreover, who is the subject whose interest is represented by the State and who exists beyond social classes? Again, instead of offering a synthetic explanation of the link between the working day, the normal reproduction of labor power, the class struggle and the State, Marx continues with the analysis of the historical facts in which these general determinations are expressed, this time no longer through the comparison between different modes of production. but looking inside the capitalist mode of production.

Thus, the exposition continues, under section 3, analyzing what happens in industrial branches where there is no legal limit to the extension of the working day. Marx finds there 18, 16 and 15-hour workdays, with child labor that reaches up to 7-year-old children. The result of these working conditions is the shortening of the natural life of the workers, the degeneration of physical characteristics such as height and weight, the recurrence of work accidents, and a series of other mutilations of the labor force. This destruction of the productive attributes of the workers even reaches the absolute annihilation of the labor force itself, as is the case of Mary Anne Walkey, a worker who dies after having worked more than 26 1/2 hours without interruption. Marx faces this same situation in his analysis of the relay system under section 4. There we see again how "the vampire thirst for the living blood of labor," particularly motivated in this system by the acceleration of the consumption of constant capital, threatens the normal reproduction of labor power.

The immediate conclusion of the analysis of these historical facts is unequivocal: when the exploitation of workers is not legally limited, the working day always transcends its normal limits, that is, labor power is always sold below its value. Marx summarizes these results at the beginning of section 5. There he says, "capitalist production [...] therefore, with the prolongation of the working day, it produces not only the atrophy of human labor power [...] it produces the premature exhaustion and death of labor power itself. It prolongs, for a given period, the time of production of the worker, reducing the duration of his life" (Marx, 1999, p. 320).

At first glance, it would seem that the unbridled prolongation of the working day affects only the worker's labor power. However, insofar as surplus-value is the product of the setting in motion of this labour-power, the premature exhaustion and death of the latter directly threatens the production of the former. Marx draws this conclusion in the following line, when he states that "the value of labour-power includes the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of the worker or for the perpetuation of the working class. […] It seems, therefore, that the interest of capital itself points in the direction of a normal working day" (Marx, 1999, p. 320). But he immediately contrasts this interest of capital with the practical movement of capital, and consequently with

the actions of the individual capitalist: "In its practical movement, capital, which has such 'good reasons' for denying the sufferings of the legion of workers around it, allows itself to be influenced as little or as much by the prospect of a future degradation of humanity and ultimately by an unstoppable depopulation. and by the possible fall of the Earth on the Sun" (Marx, 1999, pp. 324-325).

The analysis of the concrete ways in which the length of the working day is established seems to lead us to a contradiction between "the self-interest of capital", which points towards a normal working day and, consequently, to the sale of labour power for its value, and "the practical movement of capital", which leads, with the prolongation of the working day, atrophy, premature wear and tear and even total annihilation of the workforce. These same historical facts show, however, that this contradiction ends up being resolved in favor of the normal reproduction of labor power. "In its practical movement, capital," Marx goes on to maintain, "does not take into account the health and life span of the worker, except when society compels him to take them into consideration" (Marx, 1999, p. 325). In what form does "society" impose itself on capital to guarantee the normal reproduction of labor power? Above we had seen that the State was the one that definitively imposed itself by sanctioning a limit on the working day and that, in fact, it acted on behalf of a general interest that transcended the immediate interests of the social classes. We can now specify that the subject whose interest the State satisfies with the fixing of the extension of the working day is society. But we also see that this interest coincides, at the same time, with the interest of capital.

Let us dwell briefly on these last two points that have been added to us. In Marx's analysis, "society" appears to impose itself, through the State, over the interests of the capitalist class and the working class. But who makes up society if not the social classes themselves? In fact, up to this point in the work, the whole of society consists only of workers and capitalists. How, then, is it to be explained that society, composed of workers and capitalists, is imposed, through the state, over the struggle between workers and capitalists? If we look at it carefully, in reality, society is not the abstract sum of workers and capitalists. In fact, although it is composed of individuals, society as such is never the simple sum of them. What distinguishes one society from another is the set of relationships that individuals establish with each other to organize their process of social life. That is why we speak of "capitalist society" as opposed to "feudal society", "society of free individuals", etc. Society in abstracto does not exist, because social relations do not exist in abstracto. The question of what society is is thus the question of what is the "dominant social relation" at any given time and place. And in today's society, the society that the text deals with, the dominant social relation, as was already evident at this point in the work, is nothing other than the self-movement of capital; it is capitalist society. But if the "society" to which Marx alludes is in fact capital as the dominant social relation, then we still have to resolve the question of how it can

be that "capital" imposes itself on "capital." It is added to this that, in Marx's text, the interest of "society" coincides with the interest of "capital". So, if we maintain that society refers, strictly speaking, to capital, we have that capital would be confronted with capital and at the same time would not be confronted with it.

If we look carefully at Marx's analysis, we see that the confrontation that is pointed out is, strictly speaking, between society and capital considered individually, capital "in its practical movement," that is, capital that is personified by the individual capitalist. The true and only opposition is therefore between capital "as the dominant social relation" and "individual" capital. Up to this point in the work, capital as the dominant social relation had never appeared apart from individual capital. In fact, capital was shown as such a dominant social relation through the analysis of the movement of an individual capital. Here, on the other hand, a difference appears that forces us to separate them definitively. The reproduction of individual capital depends on the immediate reproduction of the labour power it exploits and, consequently, its famine of surplus labour cannot take into account the more general needs of the reproduction of the working class. On the other hand, the reproduction of capital as the dominant social relation depends directly on the extended and enlarged reproduction of the working class, and consequently its starvation of surplus labour must stop at the point where this reproduction is affected. The separation of individual capital from capital as the dominant social relation seems to leave the latter without a form of expression of its own. And, in fact, the only expression of capital as the dominant social relation is the abstraction that constitutes the general formula of capital, M-C-M", which appears in the analysis of circulation. Following the terminology that Marx will use later, we can name this capital as "global social capital".

In this way, we can reconstruct Marx's analysis of historical facts by arguing that the state represents the interest of global social capital in the class struggle, that is, positioning itself above the particular interests of each class. Thus, when we see that "the interest of capital points in the direction of a normal working day", we are faced with the interest of global social capital. On the other hand, when we see that "in its practical movement capital has good reason to deny this normal day," we are faced with the movement of individual capital. Certainly, Marx does not speak anywhere in the text of global social capital, and it could well be argued that, at least at the time of writing this chapter, he did not directly associate the state with global social capital, nor did he recognize it as its political representative in the class struggle. However, we think that the association of "society" with "global social capital" and, consequently, the association of this with the state as its political representative in the class struggle, is the only way to give coherence both to Marx's exposition and to the historical facts that are subjected to analysis in it.

Having shown the need for the existence of a working day that allows the reproduction of the labor force and the imposition of this working day at the hands of

the State, it remains to be specified what is the role played by the class struggle in this process. For this reason, the exposition continues, in what remains of sections 5 and 6, with the examination of the historical development of the class struggle around the extension of the working day. What is found there is that the laws regulating the exploitation of the working class are the very result of the class struggle. Marx says, "We have seen how these minute provisions [of the factory law of 1844], which regulate by strokes, with such military uniformity, the periods, limits, and breaks of work, were by no means the products of parliamentary lucubration. They developed gradually, as natural laws of the modern mode of production, from the given conditions. Its formulation, official recognition and state proclamation were the result of a prolonged class struggle" (Marx, 1999, p. 341).

4. Synthesis and conclusions of the historical analysis

At this point in the exposition, in section 7, Marx draws conclusions from his entire historical analysis:

> First: The craving of capital for an inordinate and ruthless prolongation of the working day is satiated above all in the industries that have been revolutionized first [technically], [...] The transmuted mode of material production and the social relations of the producers, modified correlatively, first generate the most inordinate overreaches, and then provoke, as an antithesis, the social control which reduces, regulates, and legally standardizes the working day with its intervals. […] Second: The history of the regulation of the working day in some branches of production [...] demonstrates in a tangible way that the isolated worker, the worker as a "free" seller of his labor power, necessarily succumbs without the possibility of resistance once capitalist production has reached a certain degree of maturity. The fixing of a normal working day is therefore the product of a protracted and more or less covert civil war between the capitalist class and the working class. […] To "protect" themselves against the serpent of their torments, the workers have to confederate their heads and impose as a class a state law, an insurmountable social barrier that prevents them from selling themselves together with their offspring, by means of a free contract with capital, for death and slavery (Marx, 1999, pp. 359-365).

Let us recapitulate, on the basis of this synthesis, the determinations that make the fixing of the limit of the working day.

In the first place, we have that what is at stake in fixing the limit of the working day is the delivery of the use-value of the commodity labour-power and, therefore, the sale of labour-power itself under conditions which guarantee its continuous reproduction, i.e., the exchange of labour-power for its value. Like any other relation of commodity exchange, the worker and the capitalist confront each other, as personifications of their respective commodities, in an antagonistic relation, where each claims what is due to him according to the law of commodity exchange, where both enter therefore with equal rights and where, in the end, what decides is the strength that each of them has.

Secondly, we have that this specific commodity exchange is resolved through the struggle between the collective worker and the collective capitalist, that is, through the class struggle. The necessity of this particular form of development of the exchange of labour power resides, as the "history of the class struggle" itself "demonstrates", in the fact that "the isolated worker necessarily and without the possibility of resistance" to the capitalist cannot sell labour power for its value. It happens that, unlike any other commodity, labor power continues to be produced in excess of solvent social demand no matter how much there is left over in the market. As Marx puts it, there is "a constant overpopulation, that is, overpopulation with respect to the momentary need for the valorization of capital" (Marx, 1999, p. 324). The social necessity for the normal reproduction of labour power then makes its way through the action of the workers to "confederate their heads" by acting "as a class"; and, on the other hand, the same happens with the capitalists. The result is the transformation of the antagonistic relation between the individual worker and the individual capitalist into an antagonistic relation of a general character: the class struggle.

The social relations that constitute social class – the relationship of solidarity between workers and capitalists – and class struggle – the antagonistic relationship between the working class and the capitalist class – are essentially distinguished from the social relationship that constitutes commodity exchange. But the salient point is not so much their difference as their bond. When Marx points out that the isolated worker cannot resolve the sale of his labor power for its value, what he is pointing out, at the same time, is that the economic relationship that is commodity exchange cannot be realized in a simple way, as we have been seeing it realized until now. In other words, the economic relationship cannot be realized by itself without annulling itself. This is why a new social relation, the class relation, and the class struggle relation, has to be developed. These social relations, which following Marx we could already synthesize as "political relations", develop to give way to the economic relation. And at this point we can say that what is finally being conveyed by these new social relations is the reproduction of global social capital.

Thirdly, we have that this class struggle is resolved by the sanction of a state law. Here the State appears imposing itself over the particular interests of the social classes, sanctioning a result for the class struggle. And it appears as a third party in the class struggle, precisely because it directly represents an interest that is neither that of the capitalist class nor that of the working class; it is the interest of "society," says Marx, and here we specify, of "global social capital." The state is therefore the political representative of global social capital. Following the type of argument that Marx presents with respect to the necessity of social classes and their struggle, we can say here that the social relation that constitutes the state develops because the continuation of the class struggle, that is, the simple realization of the class struggle, with permanent strikes, sabotage, lock-outs, etc., it threatens the fluid reproduction of global social

capital and, consequently, against the social classes themselves and their corresponding confrontation. The social relation that constitutes the state is therefore necessary as a vehicle for the realization of the class struggle.[3]

5. Conclusion

Marx's explanation that I have tried to reconstruct in this brief work can be presented synthetically as the necessary development of new social relations over and above the basic social relationship between the worker and the capitalist. Thus, the need for the global social capital to carry out the purchase and sale of labor power, impossible to carry out like any other commodity exchange – that is, through the individual relationship between seller and buyer of the same – opens up through the constitution of a direct relationship of solidarity both between all sellers and between all buyers and, consequently, by transforming the individual antagonistic relation into an antagonistic relation between two classes possessing commodities; in short, it makes its way through the development of the social relation that constitutes the class and the social relation that constitutes the class struggle. In turn, the contradiction between the realization of the class struggle and the need for the fluid movement of the accumulation of global social capital is resolved through the development of the social relationship that constitutes the State, where it stands as the representation of the global social capital, and consequently above the interests of the social classes. sanctioning a result for the struggle, that is, giving shape to the class struggle.

[3] Müller and Neusüss (2017, p. 211 et seq.) suggest that Marx explicitly refers to the state as a mitigator of the class struggle in these pages when he argues that "the factory inspectors warned [...] to the government that class antagonism had reached an incredible tension" (Marx, 1999, p. 352).